Students experience of accessing support at university.

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**Abstract**

With the number of disabled students in Higher Education (HE) increasing year on year, student support services, which offer much needed provision to this heterogenous group of students, have been affected by cuts in Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) forcing university to become more creative with their funds. There is moreover still a significant gap in achievement, progression and retention between disabled students and their peers and it is therefore important to review students’ experiences of accessing specialist support services whilst at university.

This small pilot study explores the experience of two students in their final undergraduate year at a south east England university which is part of the Russell group. It reveals issues and concerns around systems and processes associated with DSA. The main purpose of this pilot is to determine the viability of extending the research into a fuller investigation as part of a doctoral thesis.

**Literature Review**

*Legislations and Definitions*

Prior to the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) (1995) few disabled students accessed higher education and moreover it was not unlawful for UK universities to discriminate against disabled students (Jacklin and Robinson, 2007). DDA (1995) placed responsibility on Higher Education Institutions (HEI) to create an environment that is inclusive to disabled students and these institutions are now required to anticipate their current and prospective disabled students’ needs, make provisions for reasonable adjustments as well as encourage disclosure (Lukianova and Fell, 2016; Jacklin, 2011).

Following its ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006), the UK agreed to recognise disabilities as the “results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (CRPD, 2006, p1) and article 24 (5) made clear that member states had a responsibility in ensuring non-discriminatory access to tertiary education as well as the provision of reasonable accommodation to people with disabilities (CRPD, 2006, p7). The Equality Act (2010) further enshrined the rights of disabled people, made disability a protected characteristic and it is now unlawful to discriminate against disabled people.

The Equality Act (2010) defines disability as a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long term adverse effect on a person’s ability to carry out normal day to day activities (Equality Act, 2010, 6(1)). One could argue that this definition is problematic as it views impairment as the main cause of the problem and does not acknowledge social, environmental and attitudinal barriers. Within the higher education context, for a student to become a disabled student, professional assessment and sometimes diagnosis are required. Moreover, in order to access university support services, disclosure of a disability is also necessary. Jacklin (2011) argues this situates disabled students, and consequently impairments, as ‘other’.

*University Support Services*

The nature of the support will be dependent on students’ requirements and may include extra time for submission of assignments, borrowing library books and examinations for example. HEFCE (2017) report on models of good practice for disabled students identified assistive technology as a key element to inclusive practice. Assistive technology may include video / audio recording of lectures, provision of specialist softwares such as Mindmapping, document reading or speech recognition and note taking, and lecture notes made available on the VLE prior to the taught sessions as well as being provided in paper format. Taylor *et al.* (2016) predicted changes to DSA may have a significant impact on support provision and identified non-medical helpers, dyslexia screening process, library services and assistive technology as areas that will require much changes.

Organisations such as HEFCE as well as HEIs tend to view disabled student support from a perspective of reasonable adjustments provision, accessible environments and inclusive practice in general. Not denying that these are important, for those students disclosing a disability, and hence in receipt of various types of provision as mentioned above, their understanding of support in higher education seems to be different and seen not only in terms of resources. Jacklin and Robinson’s (2007) paper focussing on what makes support effective from the students’ perspective found that it was the personal and interpersonal aspects of support that overwhelmingly emerged as being the most important to students. Students acknowledged the resources provided to support them were important, but it was the interaction between formal and informal university structures and systems which made the support effective. More specifically effective support systems included academic and non-academic staff engaging with students formally as well as informally and crucially communication between academic and non-academic staff. All too often, academic staff are not aware of their students additional learning needs (Madriaga *et al.* 2010).

A literature search on the experiences of disabled students accessing university support services resulted in identifying a rather important gap in academic research and literature, especially since the recent changes in DSA funding.

**Methodology**

*Participants*

A theoretical sampling was required in order to carry out the pilot project. Based on Grounded Theory, this type of sampling method means the selection of participants who are not only relevant to my research question or my theoretical position, but to the argument I am attempting to develop (Mason, 2018). It could also be argued that the sample selected is also to some extent representational, that is participants are representative of the population under study (Mason, 2018). However, it is important to acknowledge here that a sample of 2 participants will not allow for generalising patterns across said population under study. Moreover, given the heterogeneity of needs in the group of students under study, depth of analysis of the data generated can only be superficial. If this pilot research were to grow into a doctoral thesis, I will need to consider the sampling method very carefully, which in this case could involve the tightening of participants criteria in terms of their additional learning needs or type of impairments. Further problems with sampling that could arise may also be contextual. For instance, and with regards to the topic under current consideration, university support services across the UK is not a homogeneous entity and there will be differences in terms of structures and processes as well as student demographic.

Two undergraduate students (L and S) not belonging to my institution took part in this study. L is 21, female, and has had a diagnosis of dyslexia since the 6th form. She is currently in her final year of an English Literature degree. S is also 21, male and has recently been advised to go through the full diagnosis testing for dyslexia. He is in his final year of a chemistry degree. The decision to select students outside of my division was based on possible problems arising from being known in my position as lecturer / course director which could possibly affect data validity due to the power relationship in place between myself and the students. In my search for possible participants, I had to call on my personal network which in itself is also problematic – one of the participants is known to me in a personal capacity. As noted by Hampshire *et al.* (2014), when the boundaries between friend / researcher are blurred, objectivity could be compromised.

*Research Instruments*

Data was created through the use of a semi-structured interview. The rationale for using this most commonly used method in qualitative research is that this particular format is more informal and affords flexibility. It allows for exploring issues and/or topics as and when they may arise (Mason, 2002). Moreover, the aim of exploring students’ experiences stems from my own ontological position which is underpinned by the notion that people’s views and experiences need to be valued. These experiences are meaningful to the social reality my initial research question is attempting to explore (Mason, 2002) and as Kvale (1996, cited in Cohen *et al.* 2011) posited human interactions are central to knowledge production. From an epistemological perspective, a legitimate way to generate data arises from my ontological position which means talking and interacting with people, asking questions and listening then analysing language use and discourse (Mason, 2018).

*Procedure*

The interview took place during the Christmas break when both students returned home from university. As S is known to me, as the son of one my friend, the recording took place in his parents’ home. Prior planning means that a short interview schedule had been prepared. Questions were open ended to allow for flexibility during the interview process as well as give the interviewer the ability to probe further when necessary (Cohen *et al.* 2018). The interview was audio recorded to allow for better listening and avoiding taking notes which may have affected the flow of the interaction (Mason, 2018).

*Ethical considerations*

LSBU ethical protocols were followed. Both participants were made fully made aware of the purpose of the pilot research, and were informed about their rights to confidentiality and anonymity during the recruitment process. This was further acknowledged on the day of the interview and participants signed a consent form to this effect (Appendix 1).

*Data Analysis*

Mason (2018) suggests the main challenge in interpretivist approaches to research regards demonstrating the data is not made up or invented and that participants’ views and perspectives have not been misrepresented. The interview recording was transcribed to help with analysis and I took an interpretive reading approach. The transcript was coded thematically and manually. I selected not to use a coding / indexing software as the transcript is short (seven pages) and therefore manageable and in no great need of cataloguing for retrieval. Moreover, this allowed to be more actively involved with the data, reading and reading the transcript over again and organising it in to theme.

**Results and Discussion**

The pilot research attempted to capture disabled students experience in accessing support whilst at university. It is important to clarify that the research was conducted with only two students therefore it is only their experience which can be presently discussed and no comparison or generalisation to the population under study can be made. The purpose of this pilot study was to identify whether the research could be developed into a more substantial project as part of a doctoral thesis.

Questions in the interview schedule focused mainly on the process of accessing student support services and what type of support students had access to at their institution. Responses were therefore descriptive of the process, access and dissemination of information, support arrangement details were also covered. Themes arising from the discussion included the time, effort and the cost students had to go through in order to access support arrangements. There was also an unexpected result which I have categorised under the theme of resilience. The term resilience denotes the ability to recover quickly from difficulties. In the context of the two students involved resilience apparently encompasses a strength of character in dealing with studying in HE with dyslexia with an added touch of stoicism and endurance in relation to navigating processes around accessing support.

*Process: time, effort and cost*

In order to access student support at her university, L. took her educational psychologist report to student services in the first term of her first year but she was told it could not be used:

*“I took along my original report and they kind of had a look at that and then got back to me and decided that it wasn’t sufficient. There wasn’t quite enough evidence. So I had to pay to have another report done.”*

L. had been diagnosed with dyslexia the year before starting university and could not remember why she had to go through the diagnosis process all over again.

*“We paid for another assessment with an educational psychologist and I’ve forgotten what the difference between… the original one wasn’t valid and new one was… although the experience of doing the test seemed quite similar to me.”*

As a consequence of this, L. was not able to have any support arrangements in place for the whole of that first term. She mentioned that the time it was taking for her to have access to support as a negative aspect in her student experience:

*L. I think it’s the time that it takes for everything to go through, because for me like even though I felt like I was very organised and immediately wanting to set it up, there were still kind of lots of delays and lots of emailing. And then during the exams I didn’t have that in place…”*

Moreover, it seemed to be taking much effort and stress on the part of the students to go through the process:

*L: I think it does just take quite a lot of emails and meetings to set up so I think you have to be quite um kind of determined to get it. and obviously for a lot of people it’s quite a stressful thing to admit that you need more help. So I think that is maybe a problem.*

*S.: When I went to speak to them and asked about would I be able to get extensions for this week and for my exams and stuff they said no you have to wait till afterwards which was 3 months after I originally went to them.*

Both students’ experience seemed to have left them with some frustrations over the time and effort that was required and suggested:

*L: “I think it could just be more straightforward. I don’t know. I think just a kind of more centralised system not having to email like maybe your tutors...”*

*S.: “And if it just took quicker to do things.”*

Another issue arising during the process was that of cost. As seen in L. statements above, she mentioned having to pay for the educational psychologist report and S. who is as yet to go through the diagnosis process, which took months to organise, is also expecting to pay for the full assessment.

*S.: I have to pay for it myself but if my parents’ income was below a certain amount I wouldn’t.*

*L.: But also the cost of it because I feel like you have to be quite privileged before you can be dyslexic which like… £300 so that just doesn’t seem fair to me that I was lucky enough to kind of have it… more people might consider it as a thing, maybe get tested if it were more affordable or free. So maybe for some people it’s not even an option that they could.*

Both students’ experience seems to suggest that there are problems with accessing support. Interestingly, Jacklin and Robinson (2007) are academics from the same university that the participants currently attend. Their study had identified issues with formal structures highlighting the need for communication between academic and non-academic staff in order not to create separate support systems. It seems that recommendations need to go further. Universities are governed by The 2010 Equality Act and therefore obliged to anticipate disabled students’ needs and to provide appropriate reasonable adjustments (Lukianova and Fell, 2016). This study suggests that this anticipation should apply at the point of registering for access to support and that a portion of the funding may need to be directed to speed up the process. For instance, in L.’s case, her educational psychologist report was only a year old and since her experience of the second dyslexia diagnostic assessment did not seem to differ from the first one, it may be safe to assume here that there were little difference between the two reports. Using the original report would have not only accelerated the process of L. receiving support arrangements from the first term but would also have saved her and her parents the cost of another educational psychologist assessment.

In the case of S., the waiting time between the university preliminary assessment which suggested possible dyslexia to the full educational psychologist assessment amounted to months. He had started the process during the autumn term but had to wait until February 2018 for an appointment with the educational psychologist. He may have to wait another number of weeks before the report gets back to his university with recommendations for support arrangements. This means that S. could continue to be penalised until semester 2 examinations.

With regards to cost, L. commented that it seems to be a privilege to be dyslexic, this is a powerful statement. Unfortunately it is not unusual for disabled people to face extra costs in all aspects of their daily life (Extra Cost Commission, 2015). What could be worrying is, as L. stated, some students may be put off by going through an educational psychologist assessment because of the cost attached. For those students already diagnosed with dyslexia in their previous education career and armed with the necessary paperwork, there is little reason to not accept this as evidence. With regards to new assessments, universities could possibly adapt their staff structure and employ educational psychologists and hence fulfil the anticipation criteria.

*Resilience*

Possible difficulties with access to support services and with the process in general were anticipated, but as mentioned earlier, the theme of resilience was unexpected at the start of the pilot project. When questioned about the type of support she was receiving, I asked whether assistive technology was something that L. had access to. Her answer was telling in two ways:

*L.: No I haven’t actually gone through the process of applying for a disabled student allowance because I think coz my diagnosis was so late on I feel like I have developed quite good kind of coping mechanisms. And I’m just getting on with it so I think it was just more the extra time. I haven’t felt like there’s been anything specific that I’ve needed actually.*

*L.: I mean with my subject it is hard because there is so much reading to do each week and I do struggle with that. But then it needs to be done before the seminars so that that can take place in a kind of productive way. So like more time for kind of week to week tasks but then I don’t see how that would be possible.*

When I questioned whether 7 days additional time to complete work would be sufficient, S. also demonstrated resilience and stoicism in the face of his difficulties.

*S.: Just because sometimes it takes longer to do things than does my peers so being set the same, having the same deadlines as them is quite difficult when we’ve got the same amount of time to do it but it takes me longer. So even if I didn’t get lateness extension thing, it would be good to even just get the work earlier, set it earlier as well would be helpful, I think. … Uh quite nervous to have to do some of the modules I know that’s some of them there’s a lot more writing involved in one of them I’m a bit worried for it.*

And when he occasionally submitted work late:

*S.: they just take off like 10% off if you hand in within a week. But then after a week then it’s just not accepted. Which is actually not as bad as a lot of other universities. So at xxxxx university if you hand it in like a second late then you can you get capped at 40%. So I think ours, our university is quite good for it, because a lot of the time if it’s within 24 hours it’s only 5% off so it is alright. Obviously, it’s not what you want but like sometimes it just takes a bit longer so…*

It is not unusual for disabled students to show resilience. For Escobar Delgado *et al.* (2018) resilience is a complex concept and “can be understood by the ability to recover, overcome and adapt successfully to adversity and develop social, academic and vocational competence despite being exposed to unfavourable events” (p23). In terms of education, they further conceive that it is an ability to resist and an exercise of strength. Both L. and S. have clearly developed coping mechanisms to deal with their learning impairment and they are also fully aware of how this puts them at a disadvantage compared to their peers. In line with Moriña (2017)’s study, L. and S.’s disability means that they have to invest more time and effort than their peers to achieve their objectives and further perceive “that they have to work twice as hard to achieve half” (p223). It is therefore crucial that HEI adopt efficient systems to support disabled students with learning from the onset.

**Conclusion**

This small exploratory pilot study seems to indicate that there may be scope to develop the research further. Although based on only two students’ experience, it is clear that there are problematic issues with the system and these have a direct impact on the students accessing student support services. In order to address these issues, it is important to listen to what students are telling us about the process.

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